Common Core State Standards Assessments
Accessibility by Students with Disabilities

The Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) of the Missouri School Boards' Association in partnership with the Missouri Council of Administrators of Special Education (MO-CASE) convened a group of experts in special education, assessment, and assistive technology (AT) to address concerns about the accessibility by students with disabilities to the standardized digital assessments being developed to measure proficiency on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and, if the issue is not sufficiently addressed, the validity of those assessments for that population.

Background
It has been nearly four decades since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act became law as P.L.94-142. This historic legislation has become known as the "Keys to the Schoolhouse Door" because of its far reaching mandates giving children with disabilities the same access to public education as their typically developing peers. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act have broadened disability law in relation to students in public schools and prohibited discrimination within the context of schools and school activities—in other words, the playing field has been leveled for students with disabilities. Today we are back at the mat on an access issue for students with disabilities—their ability to fully access assessments being developed to measure proficiency on the CCSS under two consortia, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). While Missouri is a member of SBAC, our concerns apply to the activities of both consortia.

The majority of students with disabilities today are taught general education curriculum in general education classrooms along with their same age peers. To successfully function in the general education classroom many students with disabilities regularly use assistive technology in instructional and assessment activities. In addition, students today—all students—come to school with various technology devices of choice or utilize them at school to enhance their learning. As a result the use of technology is now an integral part of teaching, learning and demonstrating academic skills and is accepted as a standard part of the educational program in many schools.

Part of being college and career ready involves proficiency in utilizing technology to access the world of knowledge and generate product or problem solve as an outcome of that knowledge. The need to be able to utilize technology, mainstream or adaptive technology, is equally applicable to students with and without disabilities. For some students—particularly those with disabilities—ensuring that assistive technology is available to them is a critical part of leveling the playing field, allowing them to independently function at an academic level equal to their non-disabled peers. This technology becomes an integral part of their educational life and will continue to be used as the student transitions to college and career environments.

In this white paper we use the term "access features" to include the following –
- *assistive technology that is added-on* to the digital assessment such as voice recognition software, a robust screen reader or scanning software and switch input;
- *assistive technology that is used in conjunction* with the digital assessment such as a large button calculator with talk back feature; and
- *access tools that are build-into* a digital assessment that provides alternative input and output options such as text-to-speech or screen enlargement that might be used selectively by a student for certain portions of the assessment based on individual needs.

We have avoided using the term "accommodation" in this paper because it can easily be misinterpreted depending on the discipline one comes from and create a great deal of confusion depending on how it is defined and applied to the assessment process.

The Problem

Currently, there are no provisions that will ensure that students with disabilities will be able to use access features or assistive technology devices that the student routinely uses in the classroom, when necessary, to access the CCSS assessments and accurately demonstrate achievement. The assessment programming that has been provided for review to date has not been described as conformant to assessment standards and no information has been provided about compatibility with AT.

There appears to be confusion about the purpose of the summative assessment, with strongly voiced objections to the use of some AT being defended on grounds inconsistent with the nature and purpose of summative assessments. For example, a summative assessment is not appropriate for use as a diagnostic tool or to inform specialized instruction on an on-going basis. Assessments for that purpose are frequent and formative. It is the responsibility of the individualized education program team under IDEA or Section 504 to determine when to teach compensatory skills, often linked with AT, in order for the student to continue to progress on or near grade in understanding and applying content knowledge while addressing foundational skills such as decoding and calculation at a pace consistent with the severity and impact of the disability. Summative assessments are appropriate to use for determining if students are college and career ready and the use of AT is critical to the validity of the assessment.

Policies and guidelines proposed to date appear to be overly restrictive; insensitive to the time it would take individuals with disabilities to sufficiently learn an unfamiliar piece of AT to yield a valid assessment; unnecessarily complex and burdensome in time and cost for schools and teachers to implement; and based on a devalued perception of technology supported performance. It appears that both consortia have relied heavily on existing state accommodation policies and practices as a benchmark for the new assessments. Since most of the existing state assessments are in paper and pencil form, it is very difficult to look at those policies as an appropriate baseline for CCSS assessments. Using a digital based assessment should enable the consortia to break out of the limitations that paper and pencil have created for students with disabilities for centuries. Examining existing policies for paper/pencil tests is not helpful and may actually be detrimental to shaping thinking about accommodations for a digital assessment. The disability community has been told repeatedly that these new online assessments will revolutionize accessibility for students with disabilities. To do any less is a violation of trust. Lessening the restrictiveness of existing state policies by "just a little bit" or even "some" is not appropriate or acceptable.

Guiding Principles

The principles that follow are intended to provide a framework for ensuring that the CCSS summative assessments are fully accessible and allow students with disabilities to demonstrate their true academic proficiency.

1. Digital assessment applications must conform to an accepted set of accessibility standards and students must be allowed to use their own assistive technology to demonstrate their true academic proficiency.

- It does not appear that the US Department of Education required the consortia to develop the assessment applications in conformance with a set of nationally accepted accessibility standards (such as WCAG 2.0 or Section 508 standards) and as a result there has been no assurance of reasonable compatibility with assistive technology.

- It is absolutely critical for students with disabilities to be able to use their own AT rather than being forced to learn built-in access features or a different AT product that is coupled with the assessment and may result in an invalid and overly depressed score. *Schools cannot afford to devote precious academic instructional time to teaching a student how to*

use an unfamiliar access feature when the student with a disability already effectively and efficiently can access the assessment if allowed to use the student's own AT.

- Frequently, security concerns are cited as the rationale for prohibiting students from using their own AT. This need not be an either/or proposition. Security needs should be balanced with accessibility needs through solutions such as allowing locked features to be "unlocked" by local administrators when necessary for a student to use their own AT. We cannot tip the scales in favor of security concerns and deny a student with a disability truly equal access.

- If the purpose of the CCSS assessments is to gauge the degree to which students are college and career ready, students who are efficient and effective AT users must be able to use those tools when they take the assessment, as those are the tools they will use in college and career. Without those tools the assessment is invalid. For example, the pilot of the SBAC restricted students, who meet specified criteria as a student with a disability, to the use of a built-in calculator. A visually impaired student, who routinely uses a calculator with a talk back feature, would not be able to see the built-in calculator and thus would be denied access. A student with a physical limitation such as cerebral palsy or juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, who routinely uses a calculator with large oversized buttons would not be able to access the assessment.

2. Guidelines restricting the use of access features must be patently justified and cannot result in disability-based discrimination or cause invalid proficiency scores for students with disabilities.

- Providing accessibility for students with disabilities through access features is a legal right afforded to individuals with disabilities. Nondiscrimination laws (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act) guarantee that students with disabilities be provided with an equal opportunity to "reach the same level of achievement" through provision of access features. Denying a student the ability to use an access feature necessary to enable the student to reach the same level of achievement is discrimination.

- Some access features that are critical for students with disabilities to demonstrate their true academic proficiency have been identified as ones that should be prohibited, restricted to a very small number of students, flagged with a "special notation", or allowed but scored as non-proficient.

- The rationale for restricting the use of access features is frequently based on the premise that the "conversion of information" done by the access feature invalidates the construct being tested. We believe this concern is limited to a very small number of test items in the lower grades that measure the kinds of skills that would be fundamentally altered by using access features, such as text-to-speech invalidating an item testing reading decoding. We also believe the vast majority of test items are not specifically designed to measure these underlying access skills and thus use of an access feature to compensate for these skill deficits does NOT change the construct tested. Unless there is undisputable evidence that a test item is invalidated by using an access feature, then there should be no restriction on the use of that access feature.

- When there is irrefutable evidence that an access feature invalidates a test item, it does so for all students, disabled or not and regardless of disability type. The idea that text-to-speech can be used on a test item without invalidating it if the student is blind but not if they have another type of disability conveys the perception that blindness is a "legitimate" reason to have decoding deficit but a traumatic brain injury is not. This kind of disparate treatment of visible and invisible disabilities is clearly disability-based discrimination.

- We challenge the two assessment consortia to move beyond the historical view of paper and pencil based assessment and textbook based curricula. When one uses the context of digital learning and assessment, access features need not be "special" nor do students with disabilities need to be singled out to use access features. When conceptualized in the context of a digital world and digital learning environment, long held views about the constructs of "reading decoding" and "math calculation" significantly shift.

3. Mandating yet another "individual student plan" to authorize and activate the access features a student needs is unnecessary and will create burdensome compliance requirements in addition to those that already exist under disability laws.

- Both consortia (PARCC and SBAC) are proposing the creation of yet another individual student team with associated meeting(s) and required participants. This team would develop a "plan" that would be entered into the assessment program to cue the digital assessment system to deliver certain access features for that student.

  This proposal is fraught with potential legal and pragmatic problems and will result in yet another layer of unnecessary paperwork. Students with disabilities are legally entitled to access features under IDEA, 504 or ADA and there are already mandatory procedures in place, with specific parental rights ensured, that are used to determine if access features are required for a student.

- This proposal will create significant internal conflict within SEA's and LEA's between special education staff and assessment staff. Each would be attempting to follow a set of requirements that are internally inconsistent. For example, if the proposed "individual student plan" team determines that the access features needed for a student are different from what a 504 or IEP team has determined, then the teachers will have conflicting directives to follow in (provide A during instruction to implement the IEP or 504 plan and provide B during instruction to prepare the student for the assessment). The school has a legal obligation to follow the accommodations listed in the 504 Accommodation Plan or IEP and would, therefore, be required to ignore the recommendations from the proposed "individual student plan" team. The "individual student plan" team would be duplicating efforts that are already required and would be more easily accomplished through the IEP and 504 Plan.

- The majority of access features should be ubiquitously available to students and selectable and controlled at the local level or by the teacher or student as appropriate. There is no need for complex guidelines or special student teams to program in which access features which student can use. Access features built-in should be available to any student unless the conversion of information provided by that access feature invalidates the test item and it should be unavailable for that item. If students are using their own AT, either via software adjustments or via policy and procedure, any access feature that invalidates a test construct should be disabled or the student should otherwise be prohibited from using it.

4. Technology supported academic achievement must be valued equally with non-technology supported.

- We cannot allow CCSS assessments to incorporate the concept of "ableism" or "the devaluation of disability" described by Thomas Hehir as "societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids." (Eliminating Ableism in Education, *Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. 72 No. 1, Spring 2002).

- Students with disabilities use technology to live, learn and work independently at a level equal to their non-disabled peers. The fact that they use technology to support their independent functioning cannot be devalued. Educators must move away from exclusive use of a medical model and accept the independent living model to view disability. A medical model identifies an impairment or lack of certain skills and treatment is delivered to remediate the deficit(s). With the medical model the locus of the problem lies with the individual and the goal is to "fix" the individual in some way through professional treatment. Conversely, under an independent living model, the problem is defined as a lack of supports, inaccessibility, and/or autonomy -- the problem lies with the environment or the interaction with the environment, rather than within the person. In an independent living model, assistive technology plays a major role in addressing/ameliorating interaction difficulties, typically without overtly needing to "fix" the disability itself. (DeJong, 1979; Pelka, 1997).

  Using technology to deliver access features allows a student to independently demonstrate academic proficiency and eliminates concerns about human-delivered access features and the potential for a human to inadvertently provide support beyond just access. We acknowledge that there will be a very small number of students with significant and/or multiple disabilities that have no viable assistive technology solutions that will provide access to the CCSS assessments. However, the vast majority of students with disabilities should be able to use technology delivered access features in both instruction and assessment to be academically independent. The following link provides a video of high school students using text-to-speech to access the general education curriculum, *http://aim.cast.org/experience/training/aim_implementation_guide* and for examples of students who are successfully using AT in college and career see the following links –
  http://www.microsoft.com/enable/casestudy/
  http://www.edutopia.org/assistive-technology-success-stories
  http://www.texthelp.com/North-America/Testimonials

5. Educators in collaboration with students and families should make decisions about when to implement skill deficit remediation, when to utilize compensatory strategies (such as AT) to mitigate skill deficits, and when to do both.

- Standardized summative assessments are not an appropriate mechanism to use in designing instruction/intervention for students with disabilities. The instructional needs of students with disabilities are complex and are better identified using diagnostic, interim, progress monitoring or other similar formative type assessment procedures.

- Summative assessment results should focus on overall accountability of buildings and schools and should not "inform" or "drive" instruction for individual students.

- While we are fully aware of the historical over-identification of students with reading deficits as "disabled" and the need for these students to receive appropriate reading intervention/instruction, this issue should be directly addressed through quality professional development activities, implementation of evidence-based reading instructional strategies and similar initiatives. The CCSS summative assessment is not an appropriate venue to use to push a "social justice" agenda of forcing schools to provide individual students who have skill deficits with appropriate and quality instruction to address those deficits.

- If technology supported academic achievement is equally valued, then decisions can be made by students with disabilities and their IEP or 504 teams about when to continue intervention in a skill area, when to use technology to compensate for that skill, and when to do both.

5. Students with disabilities along with their families and educators will be irreparably harmed if the CCSS assessments are not fully accessible.

- The CCSS assessments are truly "high stakes" tests. Because they are federally funded, the assessments will be perceived as "sanctioned" by the US Department of Education and of sufficient quality to be used to evaluate teachers, determine teacher tenure and layoffs, and could be required for students to advance between grade levels or graduate with a high school diploma. Demonstration of a valid proficient score helps to prepare a student with data for future learning and emotionally and psychologically for investing in their future and setting goals for college and career.

- If a student with a disability performs poorly on these assessments because accessibility is restricted or unavailable, the negative consequences will escalate. Teachers whose evaluation results are connected to the performance of their students may be unwilling to take students with disabilities into their classes and principals may be less willing to have special education programs included in their buildings. This will have a chilling effect on years of progress in inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms.

In Conclusion
We live in a time when persons with disabilities have shown by example that they have the same choices in careers as their peers without disabilities and can be as accomplished. Full accessibility, by students with visible and invisible disabilities, must simply not be limited when it comes to the high stakes CCSS summative assessment, the purpose of which is to accurately measure student achievement and provide accountability information so that schools can readily see how well they are preparing students for college and career. Students with disabilities must not be harmed by narrow-based decision making and outdated assessment policies and practices. To do so violates professional standards of ethical behavior; legal mandates under IDEA, ADA, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act; and our accepted perception of treating children fairly.

To that end, we strongly recommend the following:
- These high stakes assessments must have a robust set of access features including built-in "access tools" and compatibility with a wide range of assistive technology (either add-on or stand-alone).

- These access features must be available to students without unjustifiable and potentially illegal restrictions and should be selectable by students and/or educators given unique student needs and individual test content.

In addition, we strongly recommend the following:
- That both consortia consider identifying a small cadre of AT experts to ensure that the end product developed is truly accessible and the policies or guidelines do not inappropriately deny access. Most products of this magnitude that are serious about accessibility would have a Chief Accessibility Officer who has extensive expertise in accessible information technology and AT to coordinate and oversee all accessibility activities.

- That each consortia have an AT lab on contract or otherwise available to do comprehensive AT compatibility testing. Without consistent and ongoing availability of AT and IT accessibility expertise within the consortia itself, accessibility will continue to be an issue receiving reactive rather than proactive response.

DeJong, Gerben. (1979). Independent Living: From Social Movement to Analytic Paradigm, *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation,* 60(October).
Pelka, Fred (1997). ABC-CLIO Companion to the Disability Rights Movement. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc.